

World

OBAMA
X
X
X
P32



CANCER
DOCTOR
X
X
P37



Demonstrators gesture and wave Kurdish flags in Diyarbakir as the ceasefire is announced UMIT BEKTAS

KURD REBEL LEADER CALLS CEASEFIRE

PKK signals possible end to 30-year conflict with Turkey that has claimed over 40,000 lives

By **RICHARD HALL**
and **FRÉDERIKE GEERDINK**
in Diyarbakir

A historic truce between Turkey and separatist Kurdish rebels was announced yesterday, signalling a possible end to a 30-year conflict that has claimed more than 40,000 lives.

Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), called for the rebel group's fighters to withdraw from Turkey – where they have fought a guerrilla campaign against the state since 1984.

In a written statement read out to a crowd of hundreds of thousands celebrating Kurdish New Year in the city of Diyarbakir in south-eastern Turkey, Öcalan, right, said it was “time for the guns to go silent.”

“A new phase in our struggle is beginning. Now a door is opening to a phase where we are moving from armed resistance to an era of democratic political struggle,” he said in the statement read to a sea of Kurdish flags, before calling for the estimated 3,500 PKK fighters within Turkey to withdraw to bases in Northern Iraq.

Turkey is home to some 15 million Kurds who have long sought an inde-

pendent state in the Kurdish majority areas that cover eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, north-western Iran and northern Syria.

The Turkish government has been accused of committing human rights abuses against the minority population, a persistent accusation that has stalled the country's entry to the European Union. In recent years Kurd demands have softened to calls for greater autonomy, the right to education in their own language and better conditions for Öcalan, who is kept largely in isolation.

Turkish authorities have been negotiating with Öcalan since October last year in an effort to find a solution. Although the PKK – labelled a terrorist organisation by the US and the EU – have announced unilateral ceasefires before, these were largely ignored by the state. Greater hopes are placed on yesterday's announcement, however, because it came as the result of indirect talks between Öcalan and Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Mr Erdogan called the announcement a “posi-

It's a bold move – and he might even win sympathy

Is PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's announcement the beginning of a historic compromise between the Turkish Kurds and the central government? Such ceasefires have happened before only to founder because Ankara's concessions have been marginal and repression has returned after a brief hiatus.

The most hopeful aspect of the new attempt at compromise is the regional context in which it is happening. Solution to the Kurdish conflict in Turkey is essential if it wants to expand its influence in Iraq and important if it is to do the same in Syria. But over the last decade Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has never delivered the practical measures the Turkish Kurds have

COMMENT
PATRICK COCKBURN



been agitating for. In the past Mr Erdogan's ruling AKP party has made cosmetic changes but is nervous of being accused of unpatriotic behaviour by the nationalist opposition.

If Mr Erdogan does not reach an agreement with the PKK and the Turkish Kurds then the conflict is likely to get worse. The PKK's local franchise in Syria controls a series of Kurdish majority enclaves. Most importantly, Iran and the Syrian government are on bad terms with Turkey and will assist the PKK if it resumes attacks.

